Chinese Cinderella

Adeline Yen Mah

One hundred twenty-two pages into Adeline Yen Mah’s *Chinese Cinderella* and I’m finally grasping the reason why this book is named as such. In the last post I was saying how her parents left for Tianjin and everything started to get better for Wu Mei even though Big Sister betrayed her and her siblings, but it seems as though Big Sister is finally getting what she deserves. After Wu Mei’s father and Niang traveled back and forth to Tianjin, they start taking Big Sister along with them and no one knew why until one day Wu Mei noticed her writing Mrs. Samuel Sung over and over on a piece of paper. Niang had arranged for Wu Mei’s seventeen year old sister to marry a thirty-one year old friend of the family’s son.

Once Big Sister’s wedding was formally announced she began receiving wedding gifts that Niang rummaged through and she kept the nice presents for herself. The only nice present Niang didn’t take from Big Sister was a jade pendant their great aunt gave to Aunt Baba to give to her specifically. The wedding date finally comes around and Niang not only continues to treat her step-children unfairly, in fact a few of the guests comment on the difference of treatment, but she also learns of the jade pendant that Big Sister received. Wu Mei overheard Niang’s discovery and went to warn Big Sister for the pendant was supposed to remain a secret so that she could take it with her and Big Sister thanks Wu Mei for the first time in her life for the warning. Thinking Big Sister was finally going to stand up to Niang, since she adored the jade pendant, Wu Mei was surprised to find out that Big Sister lied and blamed Aunt Baba for the deceit so that she could remain on Niang’s side before leaving for her honeymoon.

Soon after the wedding, Wu Mei starts to be pressed by her friend, Wu Chun-mei for her to come over and visit to celebrate her birthday. Regardless of how badly Wu Mei wants to visit, she has to decline in fear of getting in trouble. However Wu Mei’s school ends up getting a rare school day often and Wu Mei accidently agrees to go to the birthday celebration. The group of girls that Wu Mei ends up going with decide that they will all wear their school uniforms and meet outside of the school before heading over to the party. Everything seems to be running smoothly for Wu Mei until lunch time. Due to the shortage of food rations at the school Wu Mei has been returning to her house everyday for lunch and in order to keep her father and Niang thinking that she is attending school she quickly runs home, but arrives earlier than usual. Niang starts questioning Wu Mei about why she is home so early when suddenly the phone rings and the caller is asking for Wu Mei. Niang takes the call and realizes that Wu Mei had lied to her about not only being at school, but she also broke the rule about going over to a friend’s house. Wu Mei is then slapped by Niang and later whipped by her father.

Wu Chen-mei is curious about why Wu Mei never returned to the party, but before she could continue pressing her about the details of her absence, the teacher reminds the class of the class election that is coming up. Wu Chen-mei nominated Wu-Mei to be a candidate and she ends up winning. Being overjoyed and distracted by her victory, Wu Mei skips home without realizing that her friends were following her home and when they are welcomed into their house so that they can celebrate Wu Mei’s victory, Wu Mei is summoned into her parent’s room. She finds a very unhappy set of parents awaiting her. Niang slaps her several times before her father informs Wu Mei that she has become too much of a burden for the two of them and they have decided to send her to an orphanage. Wu Mei is distraught for that means she will no longer get to be with her beloved Aunt Baba.

Since the door to her parent’s room was slightly opened, all of Wu Mei’s friends heard the slaps and fearsome voices. That is the first time anyone in Wu Mei’s class discovered what her true family is like because Wu Mei always made it seem like she came from a loving family so she could relate to the others. The next day after school Wu Mei comes home to find a servant packing up all of her stuff. Wu Mei crawls into her aunt’s room and listens to the encouraging words she has to offer.

I literally got emotional when Niang started hitting Wu Mei. I felt so much pity for the heroine and wondered how her father could allow that to happen. How could he take Niang’s word over his own daughter’s? Better yet how could Niang smack a small defenseless child like that? No wonder why there are so many laws regarding the treatment of young people now-a-days. What surprises me even more about this whole situation is how polar opposite the opinions are of Wu Mei in the family household. Niang and her father seem to think that Wu Mei is going nowhere and isn’t going to accomplish anything in her life, her siblings dislike Wu Mei because she is the reason why they all have to deal with Niang, and Aunt Baba loves Wu Mei and believes that she has the capability to do whatever she puts her mind to. I personally agree with Aunt Baba’s perspective of Wu Mei because judging by her academics and her dedication, I believe Wu Mei has the potential to go very far if she wants to.

In regards to the essential question about what human characteristics span and culture I feel as though the *Chinese Cinderella*’s characters can be directly related to both the heroes and villains in many other stories. The actions of these characters may be different, but the personalities can be related directly. To provide an example, the obvious story that comes to mind is Disney’s Cinderella. In both stories, the author’s have an extremely nice and innocent character who gets abused by their families. I sincerely hope the endings reflect each other as well because I feel as though Wu Mei deserves someone who cares about her to watch over her.

More specifically and recently, I can relate Niang’s character as the “evil step-mom” to several of my friend’s step-moms. I always hear stories about how the step-mom is being unfair in the treatment of the husband’s children. Thankfully these stories that I hear are nowhere near as physically abusive, but because Adeline Yen Mah’s story is based off of her own personal life, her descriptions of her characters actions are not blown completely out of proportion which makes Wu Mei’s and Niang’s personality so realistic.